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Daily Highlights

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TUESDAY HIGHLIGHTS

- Secretary-General proposes standby multinational force for humanitarian intervention in Burundi.
- Decolonization successes have changed international landscape, Secretary-General tells Special Committee on Decolonization.
- Talks between United Nations and Iraq on "oil-for-food" formula conclude.
- Major portions of Habitat II's statement of principles and global plan of action approved; Conference Secretary-General confident ongoing negotiations will achieve consensus.
- WHO reports Ebola fever outbreak in Gabon.
- Chairman of Committee on New and Renewable Sources of Energy calls for global energy conference in 2001.

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Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has proposed a standby multinational force be established for humanitarian intervention in Burundi. In a report to the Security Council, dated 15 February, he said the force would deter massacres, provide security to refugees, displaced people and civilians at risk, and protect key economic installations. Under the proposal, countries would earmark contingents to serve with the force and keep them trained, fully equipped and ready for deployment at short notice. In a worst-case scenario, up to 25,000 troops would be deployed by strategic air and sea lift and include parachute, motorized and mechanized units. If the parties in Burundi did not adopt a hostile attitude, only some standby units would be used and the force could be reduced to an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 troops. Any attack against the multinational force would draw an immediate and forceful response, but it would be strictly humanitarian and would not engage in combat against the parties unless they interfered with its mandate, he added.

(more)

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The multinational force would be established under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter and led by one Member State, the Secretary-General said. Recent UN experiences in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti and Rwanda suggested that, when there was no consent or peace to keep, better results were more likely through a multinational operation which could create conditions for a subsequent UN peace-keeping operation. One or more neighbouring countries would provide staging areas to train, coordinate and integrate units before operations were launched into Burundi. The advance deployment of a force headquarters and core logistic elements in a neighbouring country could strengthen the force's rapid deployment capability and enhance its credibility. It could also underscore the international community's resolve not to allow another genocide in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

The Secretary-General noted efforts by Burundi's President and Prime Minister had calmed the country somewhat. But the situation was still "desperately serious" and it would be irresponsible not to plan contingency measures to avoid a catastrophe, he said. Although the Government's official response to United Nations action was negative it was widely believed in the capital, Bujumbura, that strong steps by the Council were essential. The international community -- including the Council, individual donor countries and Burundi's neighbours -- must act in a coherent and concerted way, otherwise extremists on both sides would exploit differences and destabilize the country with impunity. Some of the Burundian military and their extremist allies were the ones most opposed to the concept of international intervention or preventive deployment, he said.

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The successes of the Special Committee on Decolonization had changed the international landscape, according to the Secretary-General. In an opening statement read by Under-Secretary-General Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, to the opening of the Committee's 1996 session, the Secretary-General said because of its efforts many Member States had joined the United Nations. He pointed out that there were still some 17 non-self-governing territories, all of which enjoyed the right to self-determination with options which included independence, free association with another State or integrating with another State. Not all were in the same category.

The Secretary-General said the great majority were small island Territories which suffer from various handicaps, including limited size, remoteness, vulnerability to natural disasters, lack of natural resources, as well as migration of skilled personnel. In recognition of that fact, the General Assembly had asked the Special Committee to pay particular attention to the small territories in order to promote political, economic and social conditions conducive to the exercise of their right to self-determination. Constructive cooperation between the Special Committee and the administering Powers was

vitally important, as was regular contact between the Committee and the representatives of the Territories, in order to accelerate self-determination.

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Talks between the United Nations and Iraq on the "oil-for-food" formula ended in New York yesterday, according to a United Nations spokesman. Under the terms of Security Council Resolution 986 (1995) a limited amount of Iraqi oil -- up to $2 billion worth over six months -- is permitted in exchange for medicine and food. Part of the proceeds from the oil sales will go to the United Nations Compensation Committee Fund in Geneva to help workers who suffered as a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

After the talks ended, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, Hans Correll, told correspondents that much hard work had been done. He stressed that the talks had been technical which was the normal procedure before decisions could be taken at the political level. He said many quite complicated technical aspects behind the texts of the resolution had been discovered. That meant detailed discussions on such issues as oil production and sale handling of the escrow account, the purchase and transport of food, bank transactions, the distribution plan and the equitable distribution of humanitarian supplies.

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The Preparatory Committee of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) concluded its final session Friday with conditional approval of major portions of a proposed statement of principles and global plan of action. The proposed final document, "The Habitat Agenda", is a global call to action and a guide for achieving sustainable development of the world's cities, towns and villages for the next 20 years. Due to time constraints, portions of the final document will be submitted to the Conference as having been informally negotiated during the preparatory process, but not formally approved. Habitat II will be held in Istanbul, Turkey in June.

A number of issues in the final text were still unresolved, including the right to adequate housing, an institutional arrangement for follow up to the plan of action and financial resources needed for its implementation. According to the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee, Martti Lujanen, those issues would be taken up during informal negotiations before Istanbul and formally during pre-Conference consultations.

Conference Secretary-General Wally N'Dow said that negotiations had been long and arduous and there were many brackets on issues and phraseology. He expressed confidence that, in spite of difficulties, the negotiating process

would succeed, and when it was over -- which might not be until Istanbul -- there would be a global plan of action which would reflect a global consensus. Enormous progress had been made in evaluating and understanding the notion of the right to housing, he said. There had also been gains in agreement on the affirmative obligations of government to make housing habitable, affordable and accessible.

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As of today, 20 cases and 7 suspected cases of the Ebola haemorrhagic fever, have been reported in Gabon, 13 of them fatal, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Scientists working on specimens of 9 youths hospitalized in the provincial town of Makokou have confirmed the initial diagnosis of Ebola virus. The 20 cases were reported in Mayibout II, an isolated village of approximately 150 people, 140 kilometers from the capital, Libreville. Twelve of the dead had direct contact with the blood of a dead chimpanzee. No cases of Ebola virus have been reported among the health personnel treating the sick, though some might have been exposed and infected with the disease.

An international team of medical experts has arrived in Mayibout II and is investigating the patients' possible contacts, as well as rumours of illness in two neighbouring villages. For the time being, WHO has not recommended any travel restrictions to or within Gabon. It said with proper isolation of people with suspected Ebola virus there would be no need for quarantine measures. The early action by the Gabonese Ministry of Health had been prompt and effective.

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The United Nations should consider convening in the year 2001 a major global conference on energy, according to the Chairman of Committee on New and Renewable Sources of Energy and on Energy for Development, E.V.R. Sastry. He suggested that the theme of the conference might be energy for the twenty-first century or energy for sustainable development.

Responding favorably to the suggestion, one committee member said that in an era of declining research and development budgets it would be a good way to see if the international community was serious about energy. He proposed an energy charter modeled on the one developed by the European Union. Another member said a conference could consider a political text and a legally binding treaty which would deal with trade in energy, the integration of regional energy grids, dispute settlement and investment in energy resources.

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